

Spring in the left wing: things start moving

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A symbolic similarity between processes in the Ukrainian left movement and some spring-time natural phenomena like occasional showers and overcast skies tends to develop into a tradition. Recently, the trend affected a once powerful political force, the Socialist Party of Ukraine (SPU). Observing current political developments in some segments of the left part of Ukraine's political spectrum, other left-wingers seem inclined to follow the trend.

Some time ago the passionate parliamentary faction of Natalia Vitrenko's Progressive Socialist Party of Ukraine (PSPU) ceased to exist due to the departure of some of its members for other factions. A number of cases of migration between left-wing factions of the Ukrainian parliament have been observed, culminating on February 29, 2000 with the establishment of a rather weird blend of Serhiy Dovhan's Peasants' Party of Ukraine (PPU) and six MPs elected to the parliament for majoritarian constituencies, led by Petro Poroshenko and, until recently, members of one of the most powerful factions, the United Social Democrats, SDPU(o). The new formation, named Solidarity, is rather difficult to place adequately in the political spectrum. Yet, the fact of its creation may indicate a political shift of an explicitly left-wing party, the PPU, towards the right-hand side of the political arena. The trend may be developed with enlargement of this new parliamentary star if it manages to attract some more protest MPs, or even result in the emergence of a new political force. The seriousness and potential abilities of the new faction may be illustrated by the departure of one of previously confirmed communists from his remarkably disciplined faction, and his newly acquired membership in the Solidarnist.

The trend of a left-wing ice-breaker dates back to February 1996. Then, On February 3, 1996, a protracted intro-party conflict resulted in the expulsion of Oleksandr Moroz's economic adviser Natalia Vitrenko and her colleague Volodymyr Marchenko. Shortly afterwards, on February 21, 1996, Vitrenko and Marchenko created an organization committee of a new party, the PSPU, and the party's foundation congress took place on April 20, 1996. The congress was attended by 79 delegates from 17 regions of Ukraine, representing 2,123 members of the new radical left political force, the Progressive Socialist Party of Ukraine. The fact was among the first pieces of evidence of the lack of unity in the Ukrainian left movement, and the party was almost immediately branded as the Trojan Horse for the left.

Yet, let us leave the four-year-old events and look at the current situation that gives us substantial grounds for viewing the developments in the left movement as indicators of a major crisis, experienced by virtually all strongest Ukrainian left-wing political parties and, particularly, by their parliamentary factions.

Today the left wing of the Ukrainian political spectrum is represented by four major political parties. The Communist Party of Ukraine (CPU) brought 119 MPs to the parliament in 1998. The Socialist Party of Ukraine (SPU) competed for votes in an alliance with another left-wing force, the Peasants' Party of Ukraine (PPU), and the two parties won 35 seats. The faction of the Progressive Socialist Party of Ukraine (PSPU) numbered 17 MPs in May 1998.

Leaders of all of the above parties took part in the 1999 presidential race. In the first round the CPU leader Petro Symonenko came second with 5,818,510 votes (22.24 percent). The third place in the race was received by leader of the socialists Oleksandr Moroz (2,953,687 votes or 11.30 percent); he was followed by leader of the PSPU Natalia Vitrenko (2,872,758 votes or 10.98 percent). Then Speaker of the Ukrainian parliament Oleksandr Tkachenko, nominated by the PPU, withdrew from the race at the last minute in favor of Petro Symonenko. In the second round, held on November 14, 1999, Symonenko was supported by over 37 percent of eligible voters. Hence, the left leaders clearly failed in the presidential race. One may take time to analyze the whole host of reasons that made the failure possible, but the fact is that Ukrainian voters did not give their credit of trust to the left-wing candidate. The failure of the left forces in the recent presidential election broke a number of myths about their strength of organization and influence in the Ukrainian society. Naturally, the failure caused numerous disputes and internal party debates about ill-conceived electoral strategies and the party leaders' personal roles in the process, and had an understandable impact on left-wing parties' prominence and image. For instance, the debates that took place in the SPU could be illustrated by the statement of one of the party's leaders, Ivan Chyzh, MP, who argued that some members of the SPU had a number of serious differences with Oleksandr Moroz, primarily concerning the evaluation of causes and

consequences of the left-wingers' defeat in the race for presidency. Today we stand on the remnants of the left movement, though this is not visible from the outside, but the defeat in the election is the proof to that, Ivan Chyzh stated publicly, probably for the first time (Segodnya, 18 January 2000).

Therefore, the general crisis escalated gradually and quietly. It featured both internal party components linked to individual party personalities, and certain external influences. The combination and interaction of these factors led to the critical tension that currently affects practically all left-wing Ukrainian parties.

Meanwhile, the clouds over the CPU that began to gather in early 2000 were brought from the outside. Gradually, it became obvious that a process for banning activities of the Communist Party of Ukraine was under way in some regions of this country. The Ivano-Frankivsk regional council decided to support demands of the population and public politics NGOs of the region about the necessity to hold a trial of the CPSU-CPU for crimes against humanity. In February 2000, members of the Lviv regional council voted unanimously at their 12th session in favor of the resolution On supporting demands of citizens, political parties and public organizations of the Lviv region about abolishing activities of Communist organizations.

The situation developed fast. After the non-left parliamentary majority was formed in mid-January 2000, and Communists and other left-wingers were removed from the leadership of the Ukrainian parliament, on February 10, 2000 the parliament's Secretariat registered a bill titled On Abolition of Activity of the Communist Party of Ukraine. The bill, drafted by 16 MPs, mostly members of the Rukh faction (Udoenko), envisaged abolition of the CPU in order to provide guarantees for the performance of their constitutional powers by the legislative, the executive and the judiciary branches, the national security and public order. If the bill is adopted, the government will have to ensure undertaking of measures aiming at implementation of this law. Commenting on the initiative, one of its authors Yaroslav Kendzior argued: if we are lucky enough, we will have the bill approved and solve a very serious problem connected to anti-statehood activities of the CPU as a subsidiary of the Russian Communist party in the territory of Ukraine (Vechirniy Kyiv, 12 February 2000).

Yet, it was more of a political demonstration effort, as under the Ukrainian legislation the parliament cannot ban a political party. Article 37 of the Constitution explicitly states that banning activity of a political party or association whose program goals or activities are aiming at liquidation of Ukraine's independence may only by the judgement of the court. Commenting on the fact of the emergence of the draft bill, Petro Symonenko argued it had been an effort to prevent the CPU from taking part in the early parliamentary election in case it was announced to take place before 2002. Meanwhile, according to sociologists, if the economic situation continues to deteriorate, the CPU has a chance to get about 40 percent of the votes.

Yet, the parliamentary election is a thing in the future. Today Ukrainian Communists failed to defend their positions in the rivalry with the new parliamentary majority. The Communist faction lost leadership of six parliamentary committees, positions of 13 deputy heads of committees, and the position of the Vice Speaker of the parliament. After the defeat the Communist faction suffered initial losses in numbers - it lost three MPs to other factions. Yet, given the situation, the problems were merely a visible prelude to deeper processes that work to weaken the CPU. In mid-February there was rumor circulating normally well-informed circled about efforts taken to establish an alternative to the CPU - a radical left-wing political organization provisionally called the Ukrainian Communist Party (UCP). Hence, the simultaneous emergence of the draft bill on banning the CPU and talks about creation of a new left-wing force may be viewed as links of the same process aiming at breaking up the Communist monolith.

CPU leader Petro Symonenko confirmed the information about efforts to create an alternative communist party and unequivocally stated it was a plan of the administration of the President of this state. He added he had received original local information that regional authorities had received orders from Kyiv to hold various kinds of meetings to establish a party with the word communist in the name. According to Symonenko, the first meeting of such party took place in the Cherkassy region and was attended by 45 persons (Den, 16 February 2000). Oleksandr Martynenko, press secretary of the President of Ukraine, refuted Symonenko's claims about the involvement of the presidential administration in setting up an alternative communist party. The presidential administration could not initiate the establishment of a communist party since the President of Ukraine is not a supporters, but rather an opponent of the communist ideology, he argued (Den, 16 February 2000).

Hence, the reports about efforts to establish the UCP found some proof. A Communist MP Victor Ponedilko argued he knew the name of the chairman of the new party but refused to name him, though arguing that the person did not belong to the Communist faction (Den, 15 February 2000). This claim and the focus on political personalities allow taking a broader view on the processes in the CPU and linking them to the general crisis of the left parties. Practically simultaneously with the developments

in the CPU, similar processes began in the Socialist Party of Ukraine, the CPU's neighbor and competitor in the left wing of the political spectrum. It remains to be seen how much these developments are linked to certain political individuals, as personal speculations in this context would be incorrect. Obviously, the crisis in the SPU does not have a clearly articulated external context: there are no efforts to ban the SPU or initiate a trial of the political party. Meanwhile, the situation of the Ukrainian Socialists features a typical SPU-style internal conflict and, notwithstanding certain difference in personalities, resembles the split-up that resulted in the establishment of the PSPU in early 1996.

Contradictions in the SPU leadership were first articulated in December 1999. On January 20, 2000, some of the party's activists announced the formation of a special platform in the SPU. Commenting on developments in the party, one of the masterminds behind the new socialist platform in the SPU Ivan Chyzh argued that by doing so we encourage all, primarily our fellow party members, to think about what kind of the party it is today, to show that it has deviated from its socialist vector... The establishment of a separate platform is an effort to halt the deterioration process. Ivan Chyzh and the organizational committee that had prepared the document explicitly stated in their declaration that the SPU had lost democratic principles, allowed violation of norms of party life and ethics in the party's leadership, and showed intolerance to criticism.

The charges were supported by former first secretary of the SPU's Dnipropetrovsk-based regional committee V. Berezka who made a number of bitter critical remarks addressed to the SPU leadership in early February 2000, and publicly complained about repression against dissidents and the actual creation of Oleksandr Moroz's personality cult (Den, February 12, 2000). His special suspicion and criticism were addressed to some people from Oleksandr Moroz's closest circle who used his softness to boost the leader's personality cult and simultaneously influence the party's policies in far from the best way. The former secretary of the party's regional committee announced he had joined the organizational committee for creation of a socialist platform in the party that would be led by Ivan Chyzh, MP.

Logically enough, the internal rivalry and disputes between the party members resulted in the public announcement of the decision of the SPU Political Council to expel eight party leaders, primarily Ivan Chyzh, MP. Other SPU activists, members of the Ukrainian parliament Serhiy Kiyashko and Mykola Lavrynenko, were also expelled from the party, following the decision backed by 63 members of the Political Council against 11 opponents of the expulsion and three abstentions. The decision resulted from almost 8.5 hours of acute debates over some party leaders' special views. Summing up the debates, SPU chairman Oleksandr Moroz announced the party and its leadership had pursued the right policy. He stated the platform itself was not dangerous, but it caused disastrous organizational aftermath and disorientation for local party leaders. The break-up in the leadership, obviously, will cause the loss of moral and political unity of the whole party, Moroz argued. And he was sure the situation had been provoked by the power-holders, thus, repeating the communist leader's claims about the initiation of a break-up of his party by external forces interested in weakening the whole left movement.

After being expelled from the party, Ivan Chyzh announced he was not going to retire from big politics and stated he and his supporters would start building a powerful united left-wing party that would primarily stand on position of the Ukrainian statehood and protect interests of the working people, including the intelligentsia and honest businessmen. Specific attention in this context should be given to his argument that our step will make think not only Socialists, but also all members of left-wing parties over personal ambitions of their leaders that they put higher than social ones. This appeal to all left-wingers may be viewed as an effort to advertise a powerful united left-wing party and an invitation to cooperate.

Naturally, the platformist MPs left the SPU's parliamentary faction at the end of February, leaving it with only 19 members. In the context of a general competition for influence between the parliamentary factions it was clearly a serious blow to the Socialist's faction.

While the things were made clear between the SPU party leaders, the most substantial and potentially challenging development occurred a few days ago, when Ivan Chyzh and his supporters made first steps towards establishing the All-Ukrainian Association of Left Forces (abridged as VOLS in Ukrainian). According to Chyzh's colleague, formerly SPU activists Vasyl Arestov, their departure from the SPU was followed by about one thousand of party members who are now prepared to join the new association, initiated by the platformists. The new party's organizational committee had received applications for membership from the Dnipropetrovsk, Zhytomyr, Ivano-Frankivsk, Mykolayiv, Sumy, Kharkiv and Chernihiv regions, Arestov said (Ukraina Moloda, 4 March 2000). Hence, the VOLS should not be underestimated: with the needed support in the regions and financing provided by eager

sponsors the new organization may develop into a powerful competitor to all other left-wing parties of Ukraine.

Given the dynamics of events, one may predict that the process of division of left-wing parties will continue. For all variations, it resembles the process of division of the right-wing movement into a number of smaller right political parties in mid-1990s. The division seriously weakened the Ukrainian right political movement. Nowadays, the method is being applied to left-wingers. By the next parliamentary election due in 2002 - unless an early election is called - prominent left-wing parties find themselves weakened and their reputation badly damaged. If the non-left power-holders wish to decrease substantially the presence of strong in numbers left factions in the next parliament not only as a result of the natural decrease of the left-wing electorate, the declared economic growth and proliferation of private owners, who, unlike the proletariat, have something to lose, may also contribute to making the next legislature less leftist. Although the process of creation of the alternative Ukrainian Communist Party has not been finalized, it may become more intensive shortly and cause severe damage to positions of Ukrainian orthodox communists.

Quite possibly, other parties, small and big, will emerge on the Ukrainian political arena. Like many others, party creators and their partners and customers know the supply is demand-driven. The economic crisis that seems to have established itself in Ukraine seriously and for a long time creates a favorable environment for demand for radical left forces. The demand side was clearly illustrated by the PSPU's relative electoral success. The process has an inevitable side effect - the growing competition between the left parties resulting in smaller chances for some of Ukraine's left-wing political parties to overcome the pass barrier (4 percent under the current law) to win seats and form a faction in the next parliament. Yet, making political predictions at an early stage is an uncertain business, and the issue of the future of the left-wing movement in Ukraine needs more time to receive a clear shape. So far, major reshuffles are in process in the left camp, and their dynamics indicate a major ideology, personality and capacity crisis.